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ABSTRACT

In research on media depiction of violence against women, two variables that have been identified as important in predicting affective and attributional responses are the sex of the subject and the victim's affective reaction to the outcome of sexual aggression. In most previous research the act of sexual aggression has involved rape. In this study, 54 male and 111 female college students read a brief scenario describing an incident of sexual harassment in which the female victim experienced a positive or negative affective or physical outcome. The subjects' affective and attributional reactions were assessed by their responses to a series of 11-point scales. The results indicated that the positive affective outcome resulted in more responsibility being attributed to the victim while a negative physical outcome resulted in more control being attributed to the harasser. A negative physical outcome resulted in the most unpleasant affective reactions experienced by subjects and the greatest willingness to report such incidents to others. (Author/NB)

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Affective and Attributional Reactions to Sexual Harassment as Determined by Outcome

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Abstract

Male and female colleges students read a brief scenario describing an incident of sexual harassment in which the victim experienced a positive or negative affective or physical outcome. The results indicated the positive affective outcome resulted in more responsibility being attributed to the victim while a negative physical outcome resulted in more control being attributed to the harasser. A negative physical outcome resulted in the most unpleasant affective reactions experienced by subjects and the greatest willingness to report such incidents to others.

Affective and Attributional Reactions to Sexual Harassment as Determined by Outcome

Recently, increased attention has been given to the issue of violence against women in contemporary society. Traditionally, this research has focused on the issues of spouse abuse (cf. Walker, 1983) and rape (cf. Brownmiller, 1975). While such topics are still of considerable interest, more recent concerns have also focused on the topics of the media depiction of violence against women and sexual harassment as contemporary examples of aggression against women. Along these lines, there has been a considerable amount of systematic experimental research designed to understand what factors are most influential in predicting affective and attributional reactions to media depictions of violence against women (Malamuth & Donnerstein, 1982). More recently, systematic experimental research is also being conducted in an attempt to identify the critical variables in helping to gain a better understanding of the dynamics of sexual harassment (Brewer & Berk, 1982; Gutek, 1985; Jensen & Gutek, 1982).

In the research on media depiction of violence against women, two variables that have been identified as being important in predicting affective and attributional responses are the sex of the subject and the victim's affective reaction to the outcome of the sexual aggression (Malamuth, Heim, & Feshbach, 1980). The nature of the victim's affective reaction typically involves systematically varying the extent to which her affective reaction to the sexual aggression is pleasurable or

unpleasurable. In most of the previous research, the act of sexual aggression has involved the rape of the victim. Since both rape and sexual harassment are considered acts of aggression rather than sexual acts, the present study was designed to assess the extent to which the variables of sex of subject and the nature of the victim's outcome reaction might serve to influence subjects' affective and attributional reactions to sexual harassment. Consistent with previous research, it was predicted that males would attribute less responsibility to the harasser and more to the victim, particularly in those situations where the outcome is favorable, while women would do just the opposite. It was predicted that women would indicate more negative affective reactions to depictions of sexual harassment than males.

Method

The subjects were 54 males and 111 females introductory psychology students from four different classes who volunteer for the experiment in exchange for extra credit points that would be added to their final grade for the course.

Materials

Each subject was given a folder containing a consent form, a two-page scenario describing an incident of sexual harassment, and a four-page questionnaire containing a series of affective and attributional rating scales.

Procedures

At the beginning of the class period, the students were greeted by two researchers, one male and one female, and asked to participate in a study on social perception. The subjects were informed that all they would be expected to do

would be to read a brief two-page story and answer some questions. They were also told that if they elected to participate, they could decide to withdraw at any time without loss of credit by simply closing the folder and sitting quietly. An inspection of the completed folders indicated that all of the subjects elected to participate. After completing the task, the subjects were debriefed as a group, allowed to ask any questions, and thanked for their participation.

Manipulation of variables. The outcome variable was manipulated in the information contained in the two-page scenario. The scenario described a series of encounters between Stan and Mary at work over a period of several weeks. Over time, Stan's behavior becomes more intimate and personal until it results in him confronting Mary in the office library by telling her that if she did not demonstrate more cooperation, he would make her life at work miserable by doing such things as spreading rumors and disrupting the flow of her work. At this point, the outcome of the story is determined by Mary's reaction. The outcome variable involves varying the nature of Mary's behavior and reaction to the harassment. In the negative affective outcome (NAO), Mary is described as feeling guilty, uncertain, and bad about possibly inviting such harassment. In the positive affective outcome (PAO), Mary is described as being delighted and flattered that men find her physically attractive. In the negative physical outcome (NPO), Mary is described as feeling nauseated, anxious, and experiencing chest pains due to all of the stress. In the positive physical

outcome (PPO), Mary is described as feeling self-assured and confident because of her rather assertive manner in handling the harassment and ability to control the situation.

Affective and attributional measures. The subjects' affective and attributional reactions were assessed by their responses to a series of 11-point scales. The reactions assessed included how they felt after reading the scenario (e.g. not at all angry to very angry) and to what extent they felt Stan and Mary might be responsible for what happened, as well as the extent to which they might report such incidents to a fellow co-worker or supervisor if they knew of such things occurring at work.

Results

Affective Reactions

Overall, the analyses of variance of the affective reactions indicated that the female subjects felt less happy ($p < .02$), more angry ($p < .03$), and more disgusted ($p < .003$) than the male subjects after reading the scenario. In addition, there was also several main effects of the outcome variable (all ps $< .05$). To summarize, the subjects expressed the least happiness ($M = 1.87$), most anger ($M = 7.51$), disgust ($M = 7.87$), and nervousness ($M = 3.90$) after reading the NPO condition. The most happiness ($M = 3.34$), least anger ($M = 4.64$), and least nervousness ($M = 2.09$) were expressed after reading the PPO condition and least disgust ($M = 5.06$) after reading the PAO condition.

Attributional Reactions

To summarize the results, as predicted, male subjects attributed less responsibility to Stan for the harassment than did the females (Ms = 9.45 & 10.23, respectively, $p < .03$).

While the responsibility attributed to Mary was not affected by the sex of the subject, it was affected by the nature of the outcome ($p < .004$). In this case, the most responsibility was attributed to Mary in the PAO condition ($M = 4.47$) and least in the NAO ($M = 2.71$) and PPO ($M = 2.70$) conditions. The outcome variable also served to influence subjects' ratings of both Mary ($p < .002$) and Stan's ($p < .003$) control over the situation and Mary's enjoyment of the incident ($p < .001$). Mary was seen as having the most control of the situation in the PPO condition ($M = 7.01$) and the least in the NPO condition ($M = 4.55$). Steve was seen as having more control in the NPO condition ($M = 9.78$) and less in the PPO condition ($M = 8.00$). Finally, Mary was seen as enjoying the situation least in the NPO condition ($M = 1.90$) and most in the PAO condition ($M = 6.03$).

The extent to which subjects indicated that they would report such incidents if they knew of them to co-workers or supervisors was influenced by both the sex of subject and the outcome of the incident. Female subjects indicated a greater willingness to report such incidents to a same-sex co-worker ($p < .02$) or supervisor ($p < .005$), $Ms = 8.43$ and 8.19, respectively than males $Ms = 7.09$ and 6.52, respectively. No difference was found between male and female subjects in willingness to report such incidents to opposite-sex co-workers or supervisors, with both groups indicating an equally low willingness to report such incidents.

As determined by outcome, reporting to the same-sex co-worker ($p < .02$) and supervisor ($p < .02$) was greatest in the NPO

condition (Ms = 9.25 & 9.04, respectively) and least in the PAO condition (Ms = 7.38 & 6.70, respectively).

Discussion

The extent to which the results of this study involving sexual harassment parallel the rather extensive body of research investigating the role media depiction of violence against women adds convergent validity to the notion that sexual harassment is an act of aggression, not an act of passion. It should also be noted that the responsibility attributed to the victim increased as the outcome becomes more favorable. Thus, if individuals assume that such behavior is desired by women, they may use such reasoning as a rationale for the harassment by holding the victim more responsible, as has been the case for rape depictions in the media. As was noted in the present study, such reasoning may also play a part in the likelihood of individuals reporting such behavior as well. As indicated by these results, it is only when such harassment produces serious negative physical outcomes that individuals may be willing to report such incidents to others, but only to others of the same sex. This may, in part, be due to the tendency of the subjects to report the most unpleasant affective reactions to the NPO condition. Thus, individuals may be willing to report such incidents only when they themselves begin to feel bad.

Future research on sexual harassment should continue to use the well-established body of research in the area of media depiction of violence against women as a means of further strengthening the contention that such behaviors are, in fact, acts of violence. In addition, other research should also begin

to look at those factors that will serve to increase the likelihood of reporting incidents of harassment by victims and other employees.

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